

TEARS ON MY PILLOW

Australian Nurses in Vietnam



NARELLE BIEDERMANN

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*I dedicate this book to the wonderful women whose stories
are told here, and to all service nurses who have served,
suffered and died for the protection of humanity.*

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Foreword

WHENEVER THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY has deployed on operations, its nursing sisters have deployed with it. When the various state militia deployed to South Africa, some nursing sisters even paid their own fares to accompany the troops to provide the care that is inevitably required when soldiers go to war. Nursing sisters were an integral part of the Australian Army when it was formed on the field of battle in 1901, nursing the wounded and sick back to health in conditions which by today's standards were quite primitive indeed.

That same dedication was experienced by the Anzacs wounded at Gallipoli, both at Lemnos within the sound of the battles on the peninsula and at base facilities at Alexandria and Heliopolis in Egypt. In France and Palestine during World War I and in North Africa and the Pacific in World War II, the dedicated sisters and nurses of the nursing services tended

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the wounded, often in appalling conditions.

The nurses who deployed to Vietnam typified the make up of the Australian Army at that time. Some were veterans of service during World War II, and of the occupation of Japan and all the intervening campaigns in which Australia was involved. For others, it was their first experience of military operations, but for all who went there, Vietnam was an environment very different from anything they had previously experienced.

Although medical technology had improved considerably since South Africa, Vietnam provided its own challenges to the nurses who were required to serve in conditions significantly less comfortable than those in which they had trained and from which they volunteered for military service. Yet they soldiered on, and many an Australian veteran is grateful for the dedication and care that these nurses provided. This is their story, told by them through someone who is continuing the tradition of Australian Army nursing.

Not only is it a record of the service of the nurses of Vietnam, this book will add immeasurably to our understanding of nurses of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps and of the role they have always played. And I am sure that whatever the future may ask of the Australian Army, the members of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps will continue to uphold those great traditions, inspired by those whose service this book records.

Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, AO
Chief of Army

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TEARS ON MY PILLOW IS THE culmination of a previous journey. The book began as an idea while I was researching the experiences of Australian Army nurses who served in the Vietnam War for my PhD, which I was awarded from James Cook University in 2001. After spending so many hours meeting with some of these women who served as nursing sisters during one of Australia's more controversial wars and researching the background to their wartime lives in Vietnam in archives and libraries, I could see that this was indeed a fascinating story, and one that people seemed genuinely interested in hearing about. I have presented elements of it to academic and nursing audiences over the past five years at conferences in Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand and Australia. It has always been extremely well received by academic and nursing audiences, and has

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stimulated further discussion on the experiences of nursing in war. Yet the notion that I could also tell these nurses' stories through a book that could reach the general community seemed like a distant dream. I knew that there was a wider audience, particularly anyone with an interest in the military or nursing, but was not sure how to take it to this next level. I have lost count of the number of times over the past few years that I have sat next to someone on a plane and had them express more than just a passing interest in what Australian Army nurses did in the Vietnam War when I mentioned that that was my area of research. I have published articles in newspapers and nursing journals and have been overwhelmed at the response. On Anzac Day 2002, a story about my study, in which several Vietnam veteran nurses and I were interviewed, appeared on a national television program. For me, it meant that I had managed to achieve one of the most highly sought-after objectives of any researcher: for the findings of one's research to be recognised by, and deemed relevant to, the general community.

When a Senior Editor at Random House, Roberta Ivers, contacted me the day after this program was televised, I was left overwhelmed and speechless. Here was my chance to take this chronicle even further and ensure that the nurses would leave a lasting contribution to the historical record, ensuring that future generations also learn about the experiences and contributions of some unknown, yet important, Australians. Not only that, I was fulfilling a promise made to the nurses who had invited me into their homes and shared their memories of their time in the Australian military hospital in Vung Tau during the Vietnam War. I truly believe that this

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was the least that I could do for these women. As a researcher, I know that it is not very often that we can make our research meaningful for those who participated in the process. To be able to do this was for me the epitome of success. I remember one of the nurses commented to me when we first met that she was surprised that anyone would be interested in her story. To her, what she did in Vietnam was simply what she had been asked to do as a nurse, and nursing is often an invisible job. Yet to those for whom the nurses in Vietnam cared, they were far from invisible. To the patients, these women provided comfort, support, hope, and a gentle reminder of home. Through their caring actions, these women brought a touch of love and humanity into the harsh and often frightening world of war. Ask any soldier who has been cared for by a nurse in war how important she was to him – he will tell you very quickly how special the nurses were, how important their kind words, wide smiles, gentle hands and womanly presence were. Many will tell you how, if it had not been for the nurses, they would not have had the courage to continue their painful fight to return to health. Some will tell you how they fell deeply in love with the ‘angels’ who stood by their bedside and held their hand while the war continued on around them. But all will tell you that what the nurses do in a war zone is vital and that they are all undervalued. The stories of nurses and nursing work in war are important, and people do indeed want to know more about what it was like for nurses in wars, if only to begin to understand the experience from their perspective. The stories of nurses in the Vietnam War are no exception.

Let me share with you how I got to this place where I can

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tell the story of the nursing sisters who served in the Vietnam War. Like many Australians, I grew up in a family with a strong history of, and allegiance to, military services and who are fiercely proud and defensive of our Anzac heritage. The Anzac tradition that I grew up with came from a selective family history and has significantly influenced my own perception of Australia's wartime past. My father was a career soldier, so military traditions and language played a significant role in our family's lives. My first understanding about the Anzac tradition is what my family wanted me to know. Generally, these were the funny anecdotes of wartime and military life. But growing up, my brother and I were also reminded of the serious side of war. My father is a Vietnam veteran who served a 12-month tour of duty with the Royal Australian Army Services Corps in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966, and nearly every male ancestor in our lineage has served this country in some theatre of war. A few years ago, we accidentally 'discovered' that my great-great-uncle was killed in action in Belgium in World War I after only 25 days in battle. I grew up knowing that my paternal grandfather was a prisoner-of-war in Changi and Kure prisons in World War II, as was his brother, but I knew very little else about him. He passed away when I was young, and his legacy has not lived on in my mind much beyond photographs, medals, trophies, and some recollections passed on to me by my grandmother. Whenever I see photographs or footage from Changi, I always wonder if one of those horrendously emaciated men is my grandfather. Sadly, his early death meant that I never got to ask him to share some of his experiences with me. Even the majority of my father's stories from Vietnam are humorous accounts of

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mateship and youthful endeavour. For his own reasons, he does not often share the more horrific or sad stories. As a result my subconscious identification of the male Vietnam veteran is of the larrikin. I know now, however, that this was not a true reflection of my father's war. His medals rarely came out of the cupboard, he never wanted to march with his mates on Anzac Day parades and, in fact, he has only recently begun to become involved with the men from his unit in Vietnam again. Occasionally, he tells a story about a moment in Vietnam that frightens me because I can see it distresses him still – but these are certainly few and far between. Instead, he regales my brother and me with hilarious stories of setting the officers' latrines on fire, or painting a kangaroo on any American vehicle that sat still in the Nui Dat base long enough, or finding new ways of keeping beer cold. We still laugh at them, but we know that there is more to be told. My family members with military service were no one special – there were no Victoria Cross winners among them, there were no citations or Mentioned-In-Dispatches for heroic deeds in the heat of battle, nor have any books been written about them, but to me they were my heroes. They answered the call to arms, and fought alongside other Australians who also stood up to answer the call.

At every school I attended, of which there were several, children teased me in the playground for being an 'Army brat'. We were the children who rarely had close friends at school because we were constantly moving, lived in housing patches of married quarters that all looked the same as the next, and wore our fathers' Army clothes on weekends. For these reasons, we were often thought of as pretty low down in the

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playground social hierarchy. I grew up alongside other Army brats, and on weekends and school holidays, our backyards became fierce war zones where we played brutal and unrelenting war games armed with our plastic rifles and our fathers' old uniforms. A ceasefire was called each night, and we would return to our homes for tea until war began the following morning after breakfast. Looking back, I had a great childhood. My brother and I escaped being Army brats relatively unscathed.

Growing up, I prided myself in being patriotic; I always believed I understood what days like Anzac Day and Remembrance Day symbolised for Australia and would become enraged at those who did not. I can remember becoming desperately angry with a schoolmate who giggled right through *Last Post* played during a Remembrance Day service at school because she thought it sounded funny. Even then, the sounds of the bugle being played on Anzac Day or Remembrance Day brought tears to my eyes because I understood just what it represented to the soldiers for whom it called. The bugle call *Last Post* is one of a series of bugle calls in military tradition. Originally, it is believed that bugle calls served to mark the phases of the day. In this case, *Last Post* signalled the end of the day. Over time, *Last Post* has been incorporated into military funeral and memorial services as a final farewell. It now serves to signify that for the dead soldiers, their duty is over and they can now rest in peace.

As a little girl, I always assumed that I too would emulate my family tradition and join the Army. In what capacity, I was not sure, but I always knew that I had to be a part of that tradition. I wanted to be a soldier, just like my father and

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grandfather and uncles. The fact that I was a female did not seem to be a significant barrier at the time; I knew that I could play war in the backyard just as fiercely as any boy I had ever met. As I was growing up I used to enjoy reading Australian war stories; stories about heroic and fearless men (always men) fighting for 'God, King and Country' – each a tale of adventure and hardship that was filled with an overwhelming aura of camaraderie and mateship. I presumed that that was what Army life was all about, and perhaps within the Anzac legend, it is. Isn't that what the old diggers remember every Anzac Day? Don't they shed a tear for their fallen mates? We, who have not been there, can only begin to imagine what it must have been like to live, fight and die alongside mates, but I think we are privileged to see the shed tear on the wrinkled face of the old and weary soldiers as they remember for us.

Despite my own family military tradition, I had little knowledge of the role of women in war, or indeed women in the military full stop. My mother had served in the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps (WRAAC) from 1968 to 1971 at a time when women were not permitted to participate in the 'real Army'. The WRAAC was formed in 1951, serving as the stepping stone from which women could serve 'in the Army'. Before this, the roles women could take up within the Australian military services were extremely limited. In World War I, there was simply no call for women in the armed or support services, apart from trained nursing sisters from the Australian Army Nursing Service and female nursing volunteers with the Red Cross, known as Volunteer Aid Detachments (VADs). These volunteers performed nursing orderly duties in hospitals, hospital trains and in convalescent

hospitals under the guidance of trained nursing sisters and medical doctors. The VADs were often insufficiently trained to adequately meet the needs of the Australian Army Medical Corps under whom they served, and in 1942, it was decided that women should be enlisted and specifically trained by the Army to fulfil this role, forming the Australian Army Medical Women's Services (AAMWS). Posted to Australian General Hospitals, camp hospitals, Regimental Aid Posts (RAP), convalescence centres, dental clinics and other units, these women carried out administrative duties in support of the Medical Corps, as well as performing cooking and laundry duties for the unit and its staff and patients. During World War II, additional units were established for women in the Air Force, Navy and Army to free up men to fight and take on combat roles. In 1941, the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force (WAAAF) was established, followed by the formation of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) a month later. The Army followed suit by announcing the formation of the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) five months later.

These servicewomen were paid significantly less than their male counterparts, and in most cases, subsidised accommodation was not provided (as it was for male servicemen). Initially, the women were limited to 'traditional' women's roles such as clerks, typists, telephonists, cooks and drivers. As the demands of the war changed these roles were expanded, and by the end of the war in the AWAS women also served with signals, intelligence and chemical warfare units, as well as operating fixed defences, radars and searchlights attached to anti-aircraft guns. While working with the anti-aircraft units, some women were also rostered on to perform guard duties

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and were armed with rifles for this task, much to the chagrin of senior AWAS officers.

After World War II, the AWAS, the WAAAF and the WRANS were disbanded, as the original establishment agreement was that the units were raised at a time of national crisis. With this crisis over and the men home from the war zones, the women were no longer needed, although many stayed on in their jobs as civilian employees of the Department of Defence. Once the WRAAC was formed, many of these civilian women quickly re-enlisted and soon the Corps was a fully operational and self-administered body. The WRANS reactivated in 1951 when manpower shortages left them without skilled personnel. It became a permanent part of the Royal Australian Navy in 1959, but women were gradually absorbed into the Navy in the 1980s. Like its Navy counterparts, a new Australian women's air force was formed in July 1950 and became the Women's Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF). The WRAAF was disbanded in the early 1980s and female personnel were absorbed into the mainstream RAAF.

As I was growing up, my mother occasionally spoke about the great times she had in the Army with her friends: participating in sports carnivals, drill on the parade ground, playing practical jokes on each other. I was fascinated by the photographs of her and her friends in their very feminine uniforms, complete with gloves and handbags. It always struck me that her stories did not involve men, even though as a clerk, she worked for them. The women in the WRAAC remained separate and fiercely protected from the mainstream male Army culture of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Like the nurses, married women could not remain in the

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service at the time and so military careers of women, including that of my mother, were often quite short. Women had to be single or widowed without children, aged between 18 and 30 (or up to 35 if they had previous military service), and those who became married, or hid their marital status on enlistment were quickly discharged. The women received 75 per cent of the male basic wage at the time. The WRAAC School in Sydney conducted all initial training for officers and women of other ranks. All female soldiers (excluding nursing sisters) belonged to the WRAAC until the end of 1984. The nurses were proud in that they belonged to their own Corps – available only to nurses, and to female medical orderlies (called nursing assistants). When the WRAAC ceased to exist in December 1984, all female officers and soldiers were incorporated into a number of Corps in the Regular Army or the Citizens' Military Forces, forming a large, 'assimilated' military service as it is now.

Apart from my mother, no other women in my family had served in the military. When I began my nursing training in 1990, joining the Army as a nurse became my principal target. After finishing my degree in 1992 and during an Honours degree in 1993, I worked at the local general hospital in surgical, orthopaedic and emergency wards. At no stage during these years did my goal to join the services wane, and the fact that at the time, Australian Army nurses were serving in Rwanda only intensified my ambition to join. I just needed to gain some decent clinical experience before joining. In 1995, I finally became a commissioned officer (officers are 'commissioned' into service because of their leadership abilities or specialist skills, other ranks are enlisted into service and develop their

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skills while in service) in one of the least publicised services in the Australian Defence Force – the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps. Before I was commissioned I wanted to know all I could about the experiences of Army nurses who had served before me. I searched bookshops and libraries; I cried and laughed along with the characters while watching television programs that portrayed American military nurses in war such as *M.A.S.H* (Korean War) and *China Beach* (Vietnam War). Over the years, I sought out and read about the varied experiences of Australian Army nurses in every theatre of war. What made the available sources that I read so powerful was that the authors of these books were often women who described their own personal experiences of nursing in war. The more I read, the more I found myself in awe of these nurses, impressed by their ostensibly silent dedication in the face of their own discomforts, fears and inconveniences to nurse sick and injured soldiers in war. Australian Army nursing history is integral to setting the scene behind the stories of the nursing sisters who served in Vietnam.

The tradition of Australian military nursing began over 100 years ago and over its history, Australian women, and more recently men, have served in virtually every conflict in which Australian troops were involved. The first Army nursing service in any of the colonies of Australia, the New South Wales Nursing Service Reserve, was raised in May 1899 with 26 trained nursing sisters enrolling. When war broke out in Africa in October 1899, hundreds of Australian women volunteered to serve as nurses. Four Australian colonies (New South Wales, Victoria, Western

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Australia and South Australia) sent small numbers of nursing sisters to the Boer War early in 1900, although nurses paid their own fares and expenses just so they could provide their service. New South Wales sent 14 nursing sisters with the second contingent of Australian soldiers and officers from the New South Wales Medical Corps in February 1900 on the *Moravian*. These nursing sisters were sent to hospitals in Cape Town, East London and Stekstream. Victoria sent ten nursing sisters with the Third (Bushman's) Contingent to leave Australia in March 1900. The colony of South Australia sent three nursing sisters whose uniforms, wages and fares were paid for by public sponsorship, and Western Australia also raised money to pay for equipment so that they could send eleven nursing sisters. It is not clear from the official records exactly where all the nurses were sent or the length of time that they remained in each hospital, or indeed their date of return to Australia, and there is no additional mention of Australian nurses. Unfortunately, there is little else written about the specific experiences of the nursing sisters from that war. Soon after the Boer War, a reserve Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) was organised to serve with Field and Base Hospitals in Australia should the Australian government declare a national emergency.

During my search for information about the experiences of Australian service nurses in past wars, I read both personal and secondhand accounts of some of the 2000 Australian Army nursing sisters who served overseas with the Australian Army Nursing Service during the Great War of 1914 to 1918. With no formal military training, these volunteer nursing

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sisters served in hospitals, casualty clearing stations and field ambulances in Egypt, Salonika, France, England, Mesopotamia, Lemnos, Italy, New Guinea, at sea off Gallipoli, and at isolated posts in India.

A strong Australian image of World War I is that of the Anzacs forging the beachhead in Anzac Cove on 25 April 1915. But we never think of the doctors, nurses and orderlies attending the hundreds of men wounded on that day on the decks of the hospital ships anchored offshore. By evening, more than 500 wounded had been taken on board the hospital ship, *Gascon*. It was on board hospital ships like the *Gascon* that many Australian Army nursing sisters first encountered the reality and misery of wartime nursing, including the dangers of being in a war zone. On the Western Front, enemy forces frequently bombed hospitals and casualty clearing stations where the female nurses worked. A total of 388 Australian Army nurses received decorations for their service in the Great War; seven of which were the Military Medal for bravery under fire. Twenty-one nurses died while on service, mainly from illness. Like those nursing sisters who served in the Boer War, little is acknowledged of their experiences.

I was also captivated by the experiences of Australian Army nurses in World War II. Between 1940 and 1945, these nursing sisters cared for sick and wounded soldiers, sailors and airmen in England, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Greece, Crete, Syria–Eritrea, Ceylon, Malaya, New Guinea, New Britain, Borneo, the Philippines, Morotai, Japan and the Solomons. The nursing sisters also served on hospital ships, sea ambulance

transport ships and throughout base and convalescent hospitals in Australia. As in World War I, these nurses often faced great personal danger.

In Greece, Crete and Tobruk the hospitals were strafed by enemy fighter planes. During the fall of Singapore in February 1942, 65 Australian Army nurses stationed in Singapore were ordered to leave their patients behind and evacuate immediately. The British ship *Vyner Brooke* was used to transport some of the last civilians and the 65 Army nurses away from Singapore. However, Japanese fighter planes attacked and sank the ship outside Singapore harbour. Twelve nursing sisters were killed or drowned when the ship was attacked, 20 were massacred by Japanese troops on Banka Island and eight died during captivity. Only 24 survived.

Two incidents less well-known concern Australian Army nursing sisters who died as a result of enemy air and submarine attacks on hospital ships in Australian waters. On 18 February 1942, the Australian Hospital Ship, *Manunda*, a casualty transport ship moored in Darwin harbour, was targeted and attacked during an air raid, killing one nurse and injuring several others. On 14 May 1943, the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur* was carrying more than 300 sick and wounded Australian soldiers when enemy torpedoes sank it off the Queensland coast, killing eleven of the twelve nursing sisters on board – in fact, only 64 people survived this attack. Despite the horror of the war witnessed by the Australian Army nursing sisters during this war, many returned to nursing after the declaration of peace, and these women were to become the inspiration for many of the nurses who were to go on to serve in Vietnam.

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Most of what I read about the nurses' involvement in World War II was first-hand accounts of wartime nursing, including several by survivors of prisoner-of-war camps. These give an accurate, personal and unglamorous description of the roles of nurses during the war years. During World War II, 71 Australian Army nurses lost their lives; of those, 53 deaths were a direct result of battle and 18 were a result of accident or illness. The strength of the Australian Army Nursing Service during World War II was almost 3500 and there were 137 military decorations awarded to members of the service.

The Australian Army Nursing Service continued after the war through the formation of a reserve nursing service but by 1949, the nursing service was integrated into the Regular Army and granted the status of a Service (Royal Australian Army Nursing Service or RAANS). In February 1951, the service became a Corps, and with it came the name change to the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps. The new Corps included both trained nursing sisters who were commissioned as officers and female nursing assistants who were Other Ranks, and received their training as nursing assistants once enlisted.

On 25 June 1950, North Korean militia forces invaded South Korea. The newly formed United Nations had employed every approach to avoid committing its troops to the conflict. After the invasion, the United Nations ordered the North Korean forces to withdraw from South Korea. When the North Korean military leaders continued to ignore this directive, the United Nations declared war on North Korea.

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In total, 30 Australian Army nursing sisters served in Korea in the British Military Zone Force Hospital, situated in an abandoned school in Seoul, as well as in dressing stations. Unlike the two World Wars and the Boer War, there were no casualties among the Australian Army nursing sisters. An additional 112 Australian Army nurses remained in Japan during this campaign, nursing sick and wounded Australian troops on aircraft and hospital trains and in convalescent depots.

Unfortunately, little has been written about the role of the Australian Army nurses in the Korean War, nor for the more recent involvement of Australian Army nurses in the first Gulf War and Rwanda where four male and 30 female Australian Army nursing officers served. What particularly struck me as a child of a Vietnam War veteran was that there also seemed to be little about the experiences of Australian Army nursing sisters from the Vietnam War era. I was disappointed by this gap, and wanted to know more about what it was like for the nurses who served in Vietnam. Not long into my first posting as a nursing officer, I remember asking several senior nursing officers about the experiences of the Australian Army nurses in the Vietnam War, but even they knew very little. One nurse said that she knew of one veteran nurse who was still serving in the Corps but that she did not talk about Vietnam. Others commented that the Corps did not talk much about Vietnam, but that was not for any specific reason. The Corps just did not seem to overtly embrace its past. Apparently the nurses simply returned to Australia and melted back into the community. My curious nature would not settle with such a response, and so began the journey that was to end in this book.

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Tracking down these nurses proved to be extremely difficult, as the nursing Corps did not keep updated lists of past serving members. Initially I thought about contacting a few willing veteran nurses through the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps Association (New South Wales Branch) and then work on a 'snowball' effect to contact others. I realised this might be too time consuming and would not reach a large enough group of veterans. I rang various Returned Servicemen's Leagues (RSL) clubs throughout New South Wales and Victoria to see if there was a national register of the female Vietnam veterans. One Sydney branch stated that women did not really go to Vietnam as 'the nurses did not count, because they did not actually go to war' and therefore they were not a part of his branch. This made me more determined to undertake the initial study. A call to the Department of Veterans' Affairs for a possible list of last known addresses of Vietnam veterans from the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps put me in touch with a Vietnam veteran nurse who worked within the Department. She suggested I contact a retired Colonel from the Corps whom she thought would have a list of last known addresses. Fortunately the Colonel did have this list and I was sent a nominal roll that was correct at 1995.

During the time that I was contacting veterans on the list, I received four letters from veterans who did not want to participate plus one envelope that had been opened, resealed and marked 'return to sender'. One particularly sad letter came from a veteran nurse who wrote that she was tired of being a 'guinea pig for every researcher that came along'. The content of the letter deeply discouraged me and I hoped that

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this was not going to be a common response. I wrote back to her in an attempt to explain the motivation behind my interest in her story and to apologise to her. I hoped the letter alleviated some of her pain and anger. Other letters that I received were from women who felt that their memories of their experiences in Vietnam were 'too painful to bring to the surface again' and they were 'trying desperately to forget' Vietnam.

Similarly, when I was contacting the women who had decided to participate in the study I received some interesting responses. Two women told me that they were not sure that there was anything that they could tell me that would be 'interesting' and felt that I would be wasting my time and money talking with them; they both said that they did not have any dramatic and exciting stories to tell and that their time in Vietnam was all very routine and mundane. These women did not believe that their particular story fits in with the popular image of the nurse in Vietnam formed by films such as *China Beach*. On three separate occasions, different women said that they felt it was necessary to inform me that they would not be telling 'bloody and gory war stories', as that was not a true reflection of what they saw. One nurse went on to say that while she worked 'up to my armpits in blood and bone all day', she was not prepared to relive it all again unless it was relevant. One of the nurse veterans summed up this sentiment very clearly:

Well in everyone's mind, the Vietnam War for us [the Australian nurses] was like it was in *China Beach* . . . all action and blood and guts. It was not really like that at all. There were no heroes or superwomen. Everyone just

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had a job to do, so we did it. I don't have bloody war stories to tell you.

The experience of nursing in war is not new. Universally, male and females assuming the role of a 'nurse' have cared for soldiers and civilians in war and conflicts in some capacity for centuries. This book presents the stories of Australian nurses' involvement in one war – the Vietnam War. The year 1999 marked the centenary of Australian service nurses' involvement in, and support of, every war and peacekeeping activity in which Australian troops have been involved. That year also marked the dedication of the Service Nurses Memorial in Canberra. The fact that there are Australian Army nursing officers, as well as nursing officers from the Royal Australian Navy and Royal Australian Air Force, on active duty throughout the world highlights the continuation of this long and proud tradition, exemplifying the diversity and extent of service that is provided by modern-day officers from the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps. Many changes have occurred within the Corps, reflecting the changes in Australian society. In 1970, members of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps were permitted to remain in the service after they married, and this was followed by a change in policy to allow married women to join the Corps. As the aftermath of the Vietnam War was winding down in 1972, the first male nursing officer was commissioned into the Corps, and by 1975, further policy adjustment permitted women with dependents to remain as serving members of the Corps.

It is important that I make it quite clear from the outset that this is not a book that describes the experience of nursing in

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the Vietnam War according to every Australian nurse – Army, Royal Australian Air Force or civilian – who served there. Neither does it describe the experiences of the doctors and medical assistants who also served alongside the nurses in the hospital, or those who worked in the field with the soldiers. This omission is not meant to diminish the significance of their experiences. When I began my PhD, I found that it was all but impossible to attempt to uncover the experiences of every nurse who served in Vietnam, so I needed to focus on one area of interest. Because of my own family background in the Army and the Vietnam War, I decided to concentrate on the experiences of the Australian Army nursing sisters.

What this book provides is an insight into how ten women remember that occasion of their lives. Included here are the stories of nurses from the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps remembering their time in Vietnam. These stories are by no means complete – there are gaps and silences where memories have faded through time or are intentionally forgotten or excluded to protect the privacy of the nurse or others. These stories are not the reality of every nurse nor will they necessarily reflect the experience of every nurse that served in Vietnam, be they Australian or American. These stories contribute a small part to the big picture of the nurses' Vietnam War. Reading through, you can feel the emotion in their stories. The nurses' modest accounts are fascinating and captivating insights of these heroic women. They are extraordinary. *Tears on My Pillow* gives us a chance to find out what it was like to be an Australian Army nursing sister in Vietnam, and witness the sacrifices made by the women and men who have served this country.